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Citation for published version:

Tett, L., Hounsell, J., Christie, H., Cree, V. E. & McCune, V. 2012, 'Learning from Feedback? Mature Students' Experiences of Assessment in Higher Education', *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, vol. 17, no. 2, pp. 247-260. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13596748.2011.627174>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1080/13596748.2011.627174](https://doi.org/10.1080/13596748.2011.627174)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Research in Post-Compulsory Education

Publisher Rights Statement:

© Tett, L., Hounsell, J., Christie, H., Cree, V. E., & McCune, V. (2012). Learning from Feedback?: Mature Students' Experiences of Assessment in Higher Education. *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 17(2), 247-260. [10.1080/13596748.2011.627174](https://doi.org/10.1080/13596748.2011.627174)

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Learning from feedback? Mature students' experiences of assessment in higher education

Abstract

This paper draws on a longitudinal study of students who entered an ancient Scottish university directly from further education colleges (FECs) to discuss the role that different assessment regimes played in their university careers. It illuminates aspects of learning from feedback from the perspective of students whose pre-university experiences of assessment provided a major contrast to that of the majority of their peers. Overall it shows that students do learn from feedback and become able to self-assess and monitor their own learning and develop their own standards. It argues, however, that their experiences can be much more productive if there is more emphasis on feeding forward to meet changing expectations over time. This enables students to develop as independent learners and means that different strategies are appropriate at different stages of students' university careers.

Keywords: assessment, feeding forward, mature students

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Introduction

This paper draws on a longitudinal study of students who entered an ancient Scottish university directly from further education colleges (FECs) in order to examine the role that different assessment regimes played in their university careers. The reason for focusing on those that have entered from FECs is that in the UK the majority are admitted to 'post-92' universities (Gallacher 2006; McGoldrick 2005) and few enter the ancient universities. This appears to be due to two main factors. First, research has demonstrated that students are more likely to 'choose' universities that seem to have other students who are like them (e.g. Archer, Hutchings, and Ross 2003; Reay et al. 2005). Second, universities' admissions policies make it less likely that ancient universities will admit students with the 'alternative' entry qualifications that those entering from FECs hold (Osborne 2003). This study is therefore unusual for two reasons. First, it is based in a university where the proportion of students entering with qualifications gained in FECs has been low, and second, it is longitudinal in nature and has been designed to follow respondents over the three or four years of their university education and the year following graduation.

The focus on assessment in this paper reflects the important role it plays in helping students, especially mature students, to succeed in their university studies. For example, Thomas (2002, 440) has identified the importance of assessment procedures and their timing in the retention of mature students. Wilcox, Wynn, and Fyvie-Gauld (2005, 708) have demonstrated the value of an extended induction period and the use of interactive and collaborative learning methods to facilitate the development of peer group and staff-student relationships that encourage retention. Tinto (1993) and Yorke (2001) have identified the value of formative assessment strategies in encouraging successful transitions into and through university and emphasised the problems that students can face in coping with different assessment regimes. Although Ecclestone (2007, 52) has argued that, 'students accept the assessment systems they experience largely without complaint or dissent and learn to navigate the various demands and processes', few studies have charted the process through which students navigate these systems. This study is therefore useful in examining in depth students' changing ideas about the assessment and feedback they experience. It also illuminates aspects of learning from feedback from the perspective of those students whose pre-university experiences of assessment provided a major contrast to that of the majority of their peers.

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Another reason for focusing on assessment is that it is a key aspect of success at university that is influenced by students' responses to the feedback they get on their work. The extent of student dissatisfaction with assessment and feedback processes is high. For example, in the UK, the National Student Survey (NSS 2005–2009) shows that this area was the one about which students expressed most dissatisfaction. For this reason this paper is concerned with students' experience of assessment practices from the beginning to the end of their degree programmes and it examines how far the feedback that students received has enabled them to engage in worthwhile learning. In particular, we consider the dynamic interplay over time between the students and the specific institutional environment in which they operate.

The sample drawn on for this paper comprises 16 students who came to one ancient Scottish university with HNC/D qualifications directly from FE colleges, who were over 21 and were studying social science or humanities subjects at degree level.

Table 1. Age, sex and mode of study of informants.

Age	Sex		Mode of study	
	Female	Male	Full-time	Part-time
21–30	1	1	2	
31–40	13		6	7
41–50	1			1
Total	15	1	8	8

The reason for the focus on this sub-sample is that they differed from the rest of the student cohort in the case-study university on a number of dimensions, in addition to their different pre-university experiences of teaching and assessment. First, they were mature, and research has shown (Tett 2000; Waller 2006) that mature students are likely to experience greater difficulties in making the transition to more formal assessment regimes. Also, unlike the main student body, they did not have peers who were entering higher education and, in addition, the majority of this sample had child-care responsibilities and commuted to the university rather than living on campus.

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The study used interviews in which students were invited to reflect on the whole of their learning experiences including their views about the teaching and assessment regimes they experienced. The students were interviewed soon after they arrived at university, at the end of each semester of their first year, and after each following academic year. The data from the interviewees used in this paper are from those that participated in all the interviews. All interviews were taped, transcribed, and subsequently coded. The analysis followed a grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2006) and involved drawing out the major themes of the interviews and then assessing the applicability of these themes across the interviews as a whole. Weighting was given to the themes according to the frequency with which particular issues were identified within groups but also according to the strength of the students' comments. These data have been used to explore in more depth the students' changing attitudes to assessment and feedback and the factors that helped or hindered learning in their courses. Each student has been allocated an identifying number and this is used to attribute quotes to individuals.

Findings

Our analysis of the interviews showed the students' changing attitudes to assessment and so the paper is arranged chronologically from their initial experience of assessment in their first semester through to their reflections after their final year. In the rest of this section, therefore, we discuss their changing views drawing on both these data and the literature.

Initial experiences of assessment

Tinto (1993, 122) refers to the university experience in terms of a rite of passage from one environment to another. He emphasises, 'the actions of the various actors in the [university] environment, such as students, faculty, and staff' and analyses how these interactions form social and academic communities in higher education institutions. For many, the transition into university will not be extreme – the student may simply be doing what generations of the family have done beforehand with, behind them, all the social and cultural capital (Bourdieu and Passeron 1979; Reay et al. 2005) that is needed to ease them into the new situation. For others, and particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, the transition may be much more stressful as they seek to come to terms with an environment very different from that with which they, their peers and their families are familiar (see Bowl 2001).

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The students who participated in this study were all moving from studying in FECs where there were considerable differences in what was expected, in terms of assessment, from that experienced in their new university environment. They were also unusual in the wider context of students studying in the case-study university where the majority enter directly from school, come from families who had previously participated in higher education and thus know what to expect.

Many of the participants commented on the differences in the ways they had been supported in their assessed work in their FEC and the contrast with their university experiences. For example:

College was more supported ... you would maybe hand your essay in a couple of times ... and she would sort of say 'put a wee paragraph in there about' whatever the subject was at the time, so you were more nursed through it than you are at university, but I wouldn't expect it to be any other way, because we're getting [graded] on it as opposed to a pass or a fail. (Student 12, Interview 2)

At the beginning of their university careers students were also very uncertain about the standard that was expected, and would have liked more guidance. For example:

At College, you could have put in a draft copy ... and you could have got pointers but equally, you could probably go along to somebody and say, look I'm really struggling ... whereas [here] there is this feeling, you've put this thing in and it will stand or it will fall type of thing.... And there is that uncertainty. Am I really on the right road? (Student 25, Interview 2)

Students were not always clear about what type of feedback they should expect and did not find the guidance on their first assignments sufficiently detailed and clear. For example:

Student 41 said: 'the [tutor] here hasn't the time to go over your mistakes [and] we had to wait four weeks to get [the essay] back'.

Some of the students also found the prospect of tackling new types of assignment daunting, particularly those who had not sat examinations for many years:

The last time I sat an exam was when I was sixteen ... you've got something like, I don't know, three, four hundred people and you had to sit at a specific desk, you were supplied with labels with bar codes and all this kind of thing, [...], you suddenly felt as though you

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were six and, you know, you wanted your mummy. It was a really strange experience.

(Student 44, Interview 2)

This comment also shows the difficulty of making the initial transition into university when you are part of a minority that lacks experience of particular forms of assessment whereas the majority will have taken-for-granted experience of examinations to draw on. It also illustrates that this experience can be infantilising and position people as needy and wanting, rather than active and in control.

Experiences of assessment in first year at university

Once students have entered the university, a key aspect of the extent and nature of their development is their engagement in learning. Engagement is defined by Hu and Kuh (2001, 3) as, 'the quality of effort students themselves devote to educationally purposeful activities that contribute directly to desired outcomes'. Many students from disadvantaged backgrounds will experience a significant culture shock on entering an institution whose practices and traditions are alien to them (Christie et al. 2008; Forsyth and Furlong 2003) and therefore their engagement may be more difficult. In these circumstances: 'higher education can have a serious impact on the learner's construction of the self, in that the opening up of new ways of thinking can break apart an apparently well-formed personal construct system' (Knight and Yorke 2003, 141). This is particularly the case when previous failures in the education system and excluding practices in the university can work together to shape negative identities.

Student expectations about feedback also impacted on how useful it was to them. For example, Student 4 in her FEC course had handed in her essay to her tutor and got it back the next day with comments that they would discuss face-to-face, whereas in her first year at university she said:

I never saw my tutor again after I got my first assessment in the first semester, because she took a long, long time to actually get them back to us; so we never ever got a chance to speak to her. (Interview 3)

Expectations about finding experiences that were familiar affected students in a number of ways but were generally manifested in feelings of uncertainty. For example:

I think it's because I have this long gap, three years and I really want to finish university so ... I look at other people in my tutorial groups. They're just like, oh I haven't started reading or I haven't, I don't know even which topic to, to choose, you know? And I ... already had

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like half of the essay or something so I was starting much earlier than others ... (Student 48, Interview 2)

Clearly engaging with the university involved finding peers that you were comfortable with as well as relating to the staff and the institution. A number of programmes, particularly those where students were undertaking vocational degrees, meant that students had to work with their peers in order to give group presentations and this could lead to really positive learning.

This was because:

We had to talk and discuss together in a group and then bring it back, and decide how it all fitted [together]. I think I learnt a lot from that. I am a very visual and auditory person, I find it very difficult to just read something and understand it. (Student 35, Interview 3)

As Krause and Coates (2008, 500) point out, interacting with peers can: 'contextualise knowledge in a conversational context, extend material outside "formal classroom" settings, build learning-centred networks and allow individuals to demonstrate their knowledge'.

However, this was only going to be possible if you felt comfortable with, and could trust, your peers.

Engaging with the university also involved participating in a new community of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991) and learning the unwritten rules of assessment. However, this could also contribute to a rather cynical attitude. For example:

I learned by the second semester it's a very technical game that you have to play. Speaking a lot to the younger ones who are very knowledgeable ... it's like, why do you waste your time reading all this? ... I know that the aims and objectives of the course are really just what you need to pass. (Student 21, Interview 3)

This comment also illustrates the issue of isolation and the lack of peers that are like you.

Those students that were the only 'mature' people in their subject area found it especially difficult to integrate into that 'community of practice'. As a consequence such students either changed their subject or never fully engaged with the university (see Christie et al. 2008).

Experiences of assessment in middle years

At this stage in their university career, different expectations between students and staff about the purpose of feedback can surface. Research shows that staff need to promote a climate in which students see feedback as an opportunity for learning (e.g. Bloxham and Boyd 2007; Boud and Falchikov 2007; Price et al. 2010). In addition, as Knight and Yorke (2003, 131)

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point out, some students are vulnerable to a sense of personal failure, particularly where their previous experience has involved ongoing supportive encouragement and feedback and they 'may see a poor grading as reflecting adversely on their ability'.

The students in our study illustrate this. One student (Student 25) who had received very good marks in her FEC found it difficult to come to terms with receiving much lower marks at university. In her first interview she comments:

We did a formative essay and I think I got 58% for that and I was absolutely shocked. I'd never had an essay below 70 at College and I was, oh well, what's wrong with this... So I went and saw the lecturer who had marked it and found that ... very unhelpful and made me feel quite unconfident when I was coming to write the next essays. I was like, what are they really looking for here? ... The problem was the feedback was very good but what I wanted to know was where was the other 40-odd per cent, you know?

In her fourth interview she was still trying to get really good grades and commented: '[some students] just look for a "C" or say "I'm just looking for a pass" ... whereas ... I haven't really got a cut-off point. I just put masses of work into it and hope for the best'. This illustrates Weaver's (2006, 391) finding that a sizeable minority of students appeared to be progressing through their course of study without a clear understanding of what was required to improve their expressed cognitive skills.

The nature of the students' engagement with assessment is clearly important. For example, Walker (2009) found that the students in her study indicated that the problem with feedback lay principally with comments about the content of the answer and that this problem was unlikely to occur if the comment included a correction supported by an explanation. She found that students might use comments to alter gaps in two different ways: retrospectively for the assignment they had just submitted, or to avoid exhibiting a gap in future work. Some students in our sample showed that they had been able to respond in these ways. For example:

I would say that I was quite impressed by the comments sheet that we got back, as there was quite a lot of useful information that I was able to dwell on. Like from the first assignment I learnt where I was going wrong, so I found it easier to do my second one, and my marks reflected that. They got better and better, so evidently the feedback was very good. (Student 38, Interview 3)

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On the other hand' the provision of feedback did not necessarily mean a student was going to make use of it, as Student 12 commented:

I can't actually remember the specific of any feedback now ... because you get so engrossed in your own little bit of work, by the end of it, you're either so pissed off with it or you're so delighted with it you don't see any faults.... You think, oh yeah, maybe, I could have done it that way or no, I don't agree with you, you know, I'm happy with the way I did it so ... it was just a case of, oh good, I've passed it and that will do. (Interview 4)

Walker (2009) suggested that: 'students find skills development comments the most usable in future work, and ... they find comments that include an element of explanation more understandable, and therefore usable, for gaps exhibited in an assignment just submitted' (2009, 70). This finding was supported in this research. For example, Student 4 said:

I only got 46% ... so I was a bit upset, because I felt that I had put a lot of work in to it. But it turned out that I hadn't quite answered the question properly, even though it was a good essay. So I have learnt to pay more attention to the question, I really keep going over it. So hopefully that will not happen again. (Interview 3)

Hounsell points out that it is important to consider not only the comments made by tutors but also the timing, phasing and salience of feedback, particularly where it 'enhances students' evolving grasp of a core component ... of a wider programme of study' (Hounsell 2007, 104). An example from our data concerned one of the participants who struggled to understand a core component of her work, namely how to reference her arguments correctly. She said:

Referencing was one thing that was picked up in one of my [essays] ... as something that I could work on but I can't really seem to get a straight answer on exactly how or what system should be used but maybe it's my responsibility to just find that out for myself. (Student 24, Interview 3)

She did find out how to reference later in her second year and by her final year She said, '[I] know what was expected of me and what standards to produce'. Other students, however, found their feedback unhelpful. For example:

I got a [low mark and] I wasn't very impressed and then she wrote these comments about you should have mentioned this, this and this and then I ... looked at my friends that were doing quite well [but] hadn't mentioned any of the things that she said that I should mention and I

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just didn't understand her reasoning at all ... I just got the general feeling that there wasn't much love so to speak. (Student 52, Interview 3)

This shows the importance of making sure that students understand what is being said and are willing to accept that it is fair. In order to do this they need to find the feedback helpful and relevant and this student, reflecting back at the end of his career, clearly struggled as he commented, 'I just kind of like took what I learned from class and tried to make it my own but that obviously didn't work' (Student 52, Interview 5). He eventually decided to graduate with an ordinary degree rather than go on to his honours year.

This example also demonstrates Weaver's (2006) finding, 'that a relatively high proportion of comments made on assignments [were] very unlikely to be usable' (70) because the students did not understand the comment or it did not provide sufficient detail. Other students in this study echoed this finding, for example:

It seemed a strange marking system [with] not much feedback [so] I wish there were more points on the sheet because ... I think you can definitely do well [in your essays] if you get good feedback. (Student 21, Interview 2)

Learning from feedback was important but receiving their work back too late to be of value was a problem for some of the students. For example, one said:

Maybe I just can't remember ... I didn't pay much attention to it. You kind of get the essays back a few weeks before exams so maybe you just don't really care. Because you're having to focus on studying so that might be the reason. (Student 48, final interview)

Students in Weaver's (2006) study indicated that they were motivated to improve when they received constructive criticism, although she found that such guidance was rare, particularly for the higher-achieving students. Although a large majority of students in her study felt positive feedback to be very important and confirmed it increased their confidence, the feedback on assessments that Weaver examined showed a decided lack of positive comments. This was also the case for our students and one example is worth quoting at length as it illustrates this point very clearly:

He gave very negative feedback and I thought to myself, gosh he's written that I should have done this and I should have done that, but I got a B and he says 'I know you can do better' Since I've come to university I've realised that to learn I have to read a lot more and I'm enjoying reading a lot more [but] his critique of that was, 'you're saying you're reading a lot

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more but where is the evidence in your work?'. And I was deeply offended ... I just thought can he not just say something a wee bit positive ... because sometimes it's soul destroying when you think I spent hours on that and he's said 'What about this?' and 'What about that?'. He's not said, 'Great, you've included this and you've included that, I'm pleased to see that you've quoted this and I'm pleased to see that you've researched that'. There's nothing like that when he's giving his feedback. (Student 41, Interview 3)

This student also illustrates Lizzio and Wilson's (2008) finding that students, 'clearly linked encouraging comments (namely, giving hope) to their resultant level of motivation and willingness to persist' (266).

Falchikov and Boud (2007) suggest that: 'the emotional experience of being assessed is ... a function of the relationship between the expectations and dispositions of a learner, relationships between learners and other people, the judgments made about learners and the ways in which judgements are made' (144). A clear example of this from our data illustrates how expectations established early on can keep on impacting. Student 29 said at the beginning of her programme that: 'the [FEC] course was more handed to us ... You go home and read this and this and this, and we were more or less told that's what I want you to look at' (Interview 2). She had been used to having individual feedback from her tutor at her FEC but found a very different atmosphere at university. She said: 'twice I approached the tutor and I probably did not ask the right questions for me to get information that I needed.... And then the second time I thought I cannot do this any more – I cannot go back because I am coming out still not knowing' (Student 29, Interview 4). In this case the student's expectations about what her university tutors could provide and the type of advice she was given were not compatible.

Experiences of assessment in the final years

It is clear that students' attitudes to assessment and feedback change over the course of their university career. For example, Francis' (2008) study of first- and third-year undergraduate geography students found that those who were entering higher education for the first time displayed high confidence in the lecturer as an assessor and the majority, 'considered that the primary role of the lecturer was to impart knowledge previously learned by the lecturer to the students' (549). She also found that for third-year students there was a greater awareness of the role of the lecturer in facilitating independent learning.

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One example from our cohort came from Student 32. At the beginning of her studies she said: 'it was clear to us what we had to do and stated clearly, but it was just never ever knowing if it was right. Is this what they were expecting of someone who is supposed to be of university standard?' By the time she had completed her third year she was much clearer:

I think the feedback sheets had been quite useful over the first and second year so by the time it came to the third year I was into the way of what they were expecting. Really what I think they were trying to [get us to] do was to put all our learning into practice ... to come up with some research-based evidence ... but you really, really had to think ... so you had to work really hard at that and get all the information and to get the information accurate. Because there were so many different elements of it and whilst it was interesting and I enjoyed doing it – it was hard. (Student 32, final interview)

This is also a very good illustration of the changing expectations that both the staff and individual students have about the standard of their work.

In terms of overall approaches to learning and studying, Krause and Coates (2008, 500) argue that: 'developing the capacity to manage one's time, study habits and strategies for success as a student is foundational to success in the first year [where study] demands more self-directed and independent approaches to academic work'. Managing time is, however, especially challenging for students who have work and families, as a number of the students in our study pointed out. For example, Student 4, reflecting back on her studies, said:

It's just time ... because I have been working and I have three children and ... I always am having to put them first, in terms of their home work and things and then I would do what I had to do much later on in the day. (Interview 5)

Several students also pointed out that the timing of essays made life extra difficult for them. For example: 'it's been difficult having two assessments at almost the same time and having to balance it with work and family, and trying to get in and out of [City X]' (Student 35). And family responsibilities could lead to a crisis, which affected their ability to produce the quality of assignment they would have liked to deliver. The amount of support available in these circumstances varied from course to course:

I mean, I know that he's very busy but the time that I did phone him I really could have done with him calling me back and it was nothing to do with working or the course, it was actually a personal issue at home. [...] the day that the assignment was due in X phoned me and said

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I'm really sorry I didn't get back to you and I said it's OK, it's too late now. I'd sat up until about six in the morning and put the piece together. (Student 32, Interview 4)

Clearly, managing time was influenced by individual circumstances but students generally found strategies that helped over the course of their studies. For example, Student 21 said: 'you're presented with all these readings in first year and you think, no way I can get through all these but you learn just to pick out pieces of information' (Interview 4). Another commented:

I became a bit more efficient at sifting through the material and organising what I needed and being a bit more confident about structuring your essay and confident about what you're putting together was right ... in fact I would say that my last four essays were written and just tweaked rather than rewritten and restructured. (Student 39, final interview)

Both these students had work and families as well as their university studies to manage but they had developed strategies that helped them cope. Student 39 also illustrated Francis' (2008) finding that for third-year students the majority also believed that the marks awarded 'were based on how much learning the student demonstrated' (551). She commented: 'I got very good marks on this course [laughing] so I obviously learned, despite moaning about the learning and teaching styles. I thought there wasn't an awful lot of teaching input but it was maybe a lot more subtle than that' (Student 39, Interview 3). This is an interesting demonstration of the way in which different understandings of what it means to be an independent learner gradually develop, leading to her having 'a huge sense of achievement' (Student 39, Interview 4) by the end of her university career.

Moving through university, however, was not a straightforward progression, particularly for mature students. For example:

Really, first year is an unknown quantity. You have not written an essay in twenty odd years you know and all that sort of stuff. Whereas second year you were a bit more comfortable as you know the place a bit more, you know how to fit in a little bit. But just now, going into third year things have just changed completely. It's all just been muddled around, you feel like you are back to square one. (Student 12, Interview 4)

Most students were able to make the transition, but this involved adapting to the processes required by the university and learning what was expected as the following quotes demonstrate:

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It was just never ever knowing if it was right. Is this what they were expecting of someone who is supposed to be of university standard? (Student 32, Interview 2)

I think probably by that time I'd got used to what the expectations were ... I'd mastered it by then! (Student 32, final interview)

Discussion and Conclusion

These findings show the journey that students have taken as they adjust to the different experiences of assessment and their impacts that are both immediate and direct and long-term and latent. For feedback to have an immediate impact it needs to be appropriate to the purposes of the assignment, relate to the students' understanding of what they are doing and be timely (Gibbs and Simpson 2004–2005; Hounsell 2007). As we have shown, it also needs to relate explicitly to students' expectations if they are to learn from it. Effective feedback also needs to enable students to develop their own long-term strategies so that they become independent learners who attend to, and act on, the feedback that they receive and learn to monitor their own performance.

Assessment and feedback should also be seen as 'dynamic' (Falchikov and Boud 2007, 148) because of the interplay between the students, the staff and the institutional activities and conditions. We have illustrated how initial engagement with the university is affected by students' construction of themselves as capable or struggling learners. This was particularly the case when students were disadvantaged by their lack of knowledge of the system and were adjusting to a very different support and assessment regime. Changing attitudes to learning and studying over time also illustrate the impact of students' growing independence and criticality and ability to judge standards for themselves.

Our findings illustrate how students have been able to navigate the system, partly through learning the unwritten rules about how to interpret feedback and develop academic writing skills and also through engaging with the learning community. This enabled the students to move towards more secure learning identities in their third and fourth years of study and was an important aspect of the process of 'becoming' students and of feeling they had gained legitimate membership of the university (see Thomas and Quinn 2006). Some students have also played an active role in challenging staff to provide more detailed and timely feedback and expecting staff to take more account of the socio-emotional impact of negative feedback.

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Their ability to do this has, however, been mediated by how far they were part of a group of peers that shared a common experience, since the more isolated a student was within their subject group the less they saw themselves as able to impact on the dominant assessment regime.

This demonstrates that the journey that the students have navigated through is a complex one where feedback is a process that is always situated within a particular learning context. One aspect of this context is the subject area and it is clear that this was an important component of the environment that students experienced. Their experience was mediated through the particular norms developed that enabled individuals to feel that they fitted in or alternatively remained on the periphery. Being on the periphery meant that it was more difficult to develop learning through loops of dialogue with staff. Instead, particularly in the early stages of their university experience, feedback was seen much more as a one-way communication from the teacher to the learner (see Askew and Lodge 2000).

Our findings have also demonstrated the difficulties of providing assessment that feeds forward and goes 'beyond the task to which the feedback relates' (Hounsell 2007, 104). This was particularly important in the early transition stage where apparently negative feedback from staff could be experienced as, 'due to a lack of care rather than the result of receiving a different type of developmental feedback appropriate in higher education' (Price et al. 2010, 280). This means that teaching staff should encourage an orientation towards learning goals through clear and timely comments where students use feedback to increase their understanding. As Knight and Yorke (2003, 130) argue:

Unless there is a strong contribution to student learning via formative assessment, there is a real risk that students will decode the tacit message regarding assessment in terms of performance, rather than of learning.... This could lead them to use surface learning approaches, to limit their attention to the listed learning outcomes, and to avoid divergence and risk-taking in their learning. (149)

Our data show that those assessing students' work should also take account of the socio-emotional aspects of feedback by acknowledging achievements and recognising the effort invested, irrespective of the grade given (Lizzio and Wilson 2008, 266). This is especially important when students have experienced a different form of feedback in their previous

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institution, as most of this cohort had, and the differences need to be made clear to students before they receive their first assessment so that expectations can be managed.

Overall it is clear from our data that students do learn from feedback and become able to self-assess and monitor their own learning and develop their own standards. However, their experiences can be much more productive if there is more emphasis on feeding forward to meet changing expectations over time. This 'feed-forward' needs to enable students to develop as independent learners and means that different strategies are appropriate at different stages of students' university careers.

This paper has illuminated some aspects of learning from feedback from the perspective of students whose earlier experiences of assessment from their FEC provided a major contrast to that of the majority of their peers. However, it is a limited sample from a particular context, so more research is needed to compare the experiences of assessment between traditional and mature students in the same institutional context. This would help us to understand how important students' initial experiences are in setting up their expectations of learning from feedback and how best to help them to become independent learners.

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